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Conversations Between Postgraduate Students and Their Supervisors:
Intergroup Communication and Accommodation

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Abstract

The main aim of this study was to analyze intergroup communication and language processes in conversations between postgraduate students and their academic supervisors. Communication accommodation theory and Social Identity Theory were used as the main theoretical frameworks. A secondary aim was to contribute to the CAT literature by further operationalizing communication accommodation strategies. Transcripts of conversations between 31 postgraduate students and their supervisors were examined using thematic content analysis, and the findings produced a number of predicted and emergent themes. The themes included dominance, status, mentoring, academic and professional identity, and postgraduate students' independence. Face issues also emerged as a central theme. At a theoretical level, the findings supported and extended CAT as a robust theory for examining ingroup and intergroup processes in supervisor-postgraduate student communication. At an applied level, the findings contribute to the literature on maintaining and improving supervisor-supervisee communication in general, and more specifically in an academic context.

Conversations Between Postgraduate Students and Their Supervisors:

Intergroup Communication and Accommodation

Conversational interactions are a rich site for intergroup communication, as the long history of research on language attitudes, and indeed the whole area of language and social psychology, attests (see Robinson & Giles, 2001, for reviews of many such areas). In recent years, research on intergroup communication using the frameworks of social identity theory and more specifically communication accommodation theory has begun in workplace contexts (e.g., Boggs & Giles, 1999; Gardner, Paulsen, Gallois, Callan, & Monaghan, 2001; Gallois, McKay, & Pittam, in press). Interactions between postgraduate students and their supervisors reflect a fascinating workplace context, in which the roles of student, academic, supervisor, and employee are negotiated and played out in a complex and sometimes tense domain. The aim of this study was to examine ingroup and intergroup communication processes in this context. We chose as our theoretical framework communication accommodation theory (CAT), as it is a robust social-psychological theory of interpersonal and intergroup communication processes. WE had as a secondary aim was to contribute to the literature on communication accommodation by further operationalizing CAT communication strategies (cf. Gallois & Giles, 1998; Jones, Gallois, Callan, & Barker, 1999).

CAT has a long history as a theory, and it remains the best-articulated theory to take social identity processes into the domain of language and communication (for detailed overviews, see Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, in press; Giles & Ogay, in press; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland (1991); Shepard, Giles, & LePoire, 2001, among many others). Very briefly, CAT examines interactants' communication goals, motivations, strategies, behaviors, and evaluations. Drawing

upon social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1974; Turner & Haslam, 2000), CAT proposes that interactants' communication goals include accommodative goals, such as signaling approval, liking, or identification, and non-accommodative goals, such as signaling disapproval, dislike, or intergroup distance (Gardner et al., 2001). CAT proposes that interactants use various communication strategies in a bid to achieve such goals, including making their communication more or less similar to that of their interlocutor, making their language easier or more difficult for the interlocutor to understand, sharing (or not sharing) the discourse, and giving the interlocutor more or less freedom to negotiate role relations (see Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988). In addition, there are more recently theorized relational strategies, including as face strategies and supportive communication (e.g., Giles et al., 1991; Willemyns, Gallois & Callan, 2000).

More specifically, interactants may use interpersonal control strategies to diminish intergroup distance (i.e., accommodate), for example by using informal terms of address, or conversely to signal distance (i.e., non-accommodate), for example by referring to one's higher status. Similarly, discourse management is seen as arising from interactants' attention to each other's conversational needs (Giles et al., 1991; Jones et al., 1999). Thus, one may accommodate by helping the other to meet such needs, or not accommodate by hindering the meeting of such needs. For example, Coupland et al. (1988) proposed that accommodative interactants may facilitate their partner's contribution to the interaction by offering speaking turns, eliciting information, and using conversational repair.

Relational communication strategies refer to interactants' use (or lack of use) of supportive communication, and their use of face strategies, based on Brown and Levinson's (1978) face theory (e.g., face threat, positive face). While they were originally proposed some

time ago (Giles et al., 1991), relatively few studies have examined relational or face strategies in any detail from a CAT perspective, although there is a large literature on both in communication more generally. This study aimed to add to the literature on CAT by examining these strategies in particular.

We used the interpretive analytical approach advocated by Tracy and Naughton (1994), termed “identity-implicative analysis”. The identity-implicative approach has a strong focus on inferring speakers’ personal and social identities from their communication, including their occupational or role identities. Tracy and Naughton argued that the identity-implicative approach offers a methodology that is “textually and contextually sensitive while addressing the kinds of process-outcome research questions that have been central to communicative enquiry” (p. 298). In the present study, transcripts of conversations between supervisors and their postgraduate students were carefully examined over numerous readings to reveal themes predicted from CAT, as well as emergent themes. Themes were predicted on the basis of a previous study in this program of research (see Willemyns et al., 2000), as well as from theory and the literature. At the same time, emergent themes that were not predicted on the basis of CAT were also identified, coded and interpreted.

It was expected that mainly accommodative themes would appear. This was both because of the positive nature of the conversations in the context of the study, and on a positive bias in the sample (i.e., we expected students and supervisors who were more satisfied with their relationship and communication to be more likely to volunteer for the study). Nevertheless, it was also predicted that a number of non-accommodative themes would appear, as such communication can signify existing role differences that are perceived in either neutral or even in positive terms. For example, we expected a theme around status difference to appear, but that the

role difference between students and supervisors might not always be negatively perceived. Furthermore, face themes, especially politeness, were expected to be prominent, given the impression-management demands of face-to-face conversations.

Method

Participants

There were 62 participants (31 dyads), comprising postgraduate (PhD and Masters) students and their academic advisors from various departments of a large Australian university. The age range of the supervisors was 29 to 63 years ($M = 46.10$, $SD = 9.60$) and the age range of the students was 20 to 47 years ($M = 26.45$, $SD = 6.65$). The gender and status configuration of the dyads is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Gender and Status Configuration of the 31 Dyads

Male supervisors, male students	15
Male supervisors, female students	7
Female supervisors, male students	3
Female supervisors, female students	6

Initially, over 100 academic supervisors were selected randomly from the university telephone directory, and were contacted by telephone, mail, or in person. They were informed that the main aim of the study was to examine communication between supervisors and supervisees. The researcher explained that participants in the study would, in the advisor's

office, participate in a confidential 15 minute audio-recorded discussion about effective communication between supervisors and postgraduate students. If they agreed to participate, they were asked for contact details of two or three of their postgraduate students. Next, postgraduate students of the volunteer supervisors were contacted. If a supervisor and one of his or her postgraduate students both agreed to participate, an appointment was made.

Procedure

In the supervisor's office, the participants were asked to assume the seating arrangements they usually took during their meetings. A cassette-recorder was placed on the supervisor's desk to record the discussion as unobtrusively as possible, out of their direct line of vision. After answering any questions, the researcher activated the cassette recorder and left the room. Fifteen minutes later, the researcher returned and turned off the cassette recorder, explained the aims of the study, and answered any questions the participants had.

Coding of Transcripts

The conversations were transcribed as text files, and the transcripts were coded using the QSR NVIVO program (Richards, 1999). Coding was done by the first author, using a combination of a data-driven and theory driven approach. Pre-determined categories based on CAT were set up in NVIVO, and the transcripts were read many times. Over a number of readings, text units were categorized into the predetermined categories. Also over many readings of the transcripts, emergent categories were added, and text units were coded into these categories accordingly.

Results and Discussion

The themes that emerged from the transcripts are presented in Table 2. Typical examples of the themes are presented and interpreted below in terms of their contribution to CAT. As

expected in this context, most of the themes were accommodative or positive in nature; accommodative themes are interpreted first, followed by non-accommodative ones. As Table 2 indicates, they reflected the strategies of discourse management, interpersonal control, and relational communication theorized in CAT. Approximation strategies appear mainly in speech variables like accent and in nonverbal behavior; only language was coded in this study. In addition, these people knew each other well, making the use of interpretive strategies less likely.

Table 2
Main Themes Emerging in the Coding, Categorized Using CAT

Category: Accommodative Interpersonal Control

Non-dominating, equistatus
Out-of-role references
Similarities
Mentoring/guidance
Individualization*
Academic ingroup identity*
Independence of postgraduate students*

Category: Accommodative Discourse Management

Willing to discuss/listen
Accommodative conversational control
Approachability, accessibility*

Category: Accommodative Relational Communication

Trust, honesty, and openness
Praise
Rapport

Category: Non-accommodative Interpersonal Control

Power, status, and outgroup references
Role-appropriate behavior
Intimidation, power gap*

Category: Non-accommodative Discourse Management

Directives

Category: Non-accommodative Relational Communication

Negative face (Impinging)
Face threat

NOTE: * Non-predicted emergent themes.

Accommodative Interpersonal Control

Non-dominating, equistatus. The theme of non-dominance or equal status between the supervisor and postgraduate student was salient to both groups, and was often expressed as the need for “mutual respect”. The following is an exchange that illustrates this theme.

Extract 1. Supervisor: ... equality, postgrads and supervisors should treat each

other as equals ... it's not Rob and Professor...

Postgraduate: Yeah ... it should be mutual respect, although I think respect should

be earned, certainly in this case it's not a problem at all. (31 male

supervisor, 32 male postgrad²).

This exchange illustrates an agreement between the supervisor and postgraduate student that an intergroup power gap, based on dominance or status differences, should not be perceived in their working relationship. Here, both interactants were accommodating by expressing the desire to see each other in ingroup terms despite the status differential between them.

Out-of-role references. The predicted theme of *out-of-role references* also emerged. A typical example follows:

Extract 2. Postgraduate student: I think, part of our relationship that I enjoy, it's

not always a student-teacher relationship, well it is, but there's other aspects

of it ... (11 male supervisor, 12 male postgrad).

When a supervisor referred to him or herself in a non-supervisory role, it was often in the context of accommodating the student in an ingroup context, by referring to his or her own days as a student in a similar position to the postgraduate student, as shown in the following two excerpts:

Extract 3. Supervisor: Well, going back to when I was a student ... (47 female supervisor, 48 female postgrad)

Extract 4. Supervisor: Well, as a student, my own supervisor didn't contribute much to my own thesis ... I'd go in and have a chat from time to time, in which we talked about anything but work (laughs). (3 male supervisor, 4 male postgrad).

In other cases, the supervisor invoked other roles, apart from his or her supervisory role:

Extract 5. Supervisor: ... I'm a squash player, I'm a cartoonist ... I'm a female ... (7 female supervisor, 8 male postgrad).

When a supervisor referred to him or herself in terms of a non-supervisory role, the supervisor invoked other identities, thereby emphasizing that he or she was a fellow human being with roles and identities apart from the supervisory one. It is argued that by doing so, the supervisor accommodated by reducing the perception of a status differential with the student.

Individualization. Individualization refers to the social-psychological process of perceiving the other person as an individual, rather than as a stereotypical member of an outgroup (see Hogg & Terry, 2000). Individualization is similar to out-of-role references, but while out-of-role references may often invoke individualization by positioning a person in terms of a non-supervisor or non-postgraduate role, individualization focuses more on positioning the interactants as individuals *within* their status group of supervisor or postgraduate student, as shown in the following statement by a supervisor:

Extract 6. Supervisor: ... I mean at postgraduate level it's got to be more intimate, your knowledge of the actual student, than when they're just an undergraduate student facing a crowd sort of thing ... I was explaining to

Michael [EXPERIMENTER] that different students, I treat them differently, because their projects are different and their different personality. (59 male supervisor, 60 male postgrad).

The following exchange illustrated that individualization was also an important issue for postgraduate students:

Extract 7. Student: Yes, I've noticed the differences between postgrad and undergrad ... dealing with lecturers ...

Supervisor: In what respect?

Student: Suddenly they recognize you and say hello to you ...

Supervisor: Part of that could be that they know who you are or there are masses and masses of undergrads ... they don't stand out ...

Student: True, true maybe ...

Supervisor: Like out of a class of 250, I would be safe to say I probably know about five of them ... (69 female supervisor, 70 female postgrad).

Clearly the process of perceiving each other as individuals, rather than merely as members of the other status group (supervisor or postgraduate student), was an accommodative process, as there was an emphasis on perceiving the other person at a more interpersonal than intergroup level.

Similarities. Expressing or implying similarities is one of the central communication strategies underlying accommodative communication (Giles, 1973). Indeed CAT drew upon similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971) to propose that communicating similarities is a powerful accommodative strategy, with the speaker's underlying goal of invoking an ingroup identity or interpersonal affiliation with the other person. In the present study, similarities were

expressed in many forms, from explicit references to belonging to similar social groups, to explicit references to similarity in communication style, as shown in the following examples:

Extract 8. Supervisor: Funny thing is ... when we were brainstorming a PhD topic and refining its focus ... it became clear we thought very similarly, and were on the same wavelength. (7 female supervisor, 8 female postgrad).

Extract 9. Supervisor: I think compatibility is important ... I think we both have an easy-going communication style ... (45 male supervisor, 46 male supervisor).

As well as invoking similarities, the following excerpt illustrates an out-of-role reference, invoking a sense of ingroup identity based on nationality:

Extract 10. Postgraduate: ... Yeah, we are Australian, aren't we? (supervisor laughs) (31 male supervisor, 32 male postgrad).

Implicit references to similarities also emerged, as in the following case where the postgraduate referred to his supervisor being in an age group not too distant from his own:

Extract 11. Postgraduate: ... Yeah, because you're younger ... if my supervisor was someone older ... an older man ... it would be different, more academic oriented ... probably he would talk down to me. (5 male supervisor, 6 male postgrad).

These examples also indicate the themes emerging in the present study that highlighted accommodative communication, especially in terms of communicating ingroup identity and similarities. This theme points to conscious or subconscious attempts by the interactants to reduce the status differential between supervisors and postgraduate students.

Academic ingroup identity. As would be expected in interactions between postgraduate students and their supervisors, academic identity was a salient theme (see Tracy, 1997; Tracy & Naughton, 1994). Invoking academic identity, either explicitly or implicitly, is a way for the speaker to position him or herself as an ingroup member vis a vis the other interactant, and thereby accommodating. The following two examples are illustrations:

Extract 12. Supervisor: In a sense, once you become a postgraduate, I think you're entitled to know a little more about what happens in academia ... (11 male supervisor, 12 male postgrad).

Extract 13. Student: ... in academic life you've got to narrow [the research focus] down, the narrowing down seems to be by emphasizing one aspect of the situation. (13 male supervisor, 14 male postgrad).

Mentoring and guidance. The supervisor-postgraduate student relationship can be considered a mentoring relationship, in that the postgraduate student starts by being largely dependent upon his or her supervisor, benefiting from both socio-emotive and instrumental support and guidance, and gradually becoming increasingly independent (Russell & Adams, 1997; Willemyns, Gallois & Callan, 1999). Again, referring to the other interactant as a mentor or protégé is an accommodative interpersonal control strategy, as it positions the other interactant as an ingroup member. It was clear that many supervisors and postgraduate students perceived their relationship as a mentoring relationship, as shown in the following exchange:

Extract 14. Supervisor: I see a coach-athlete relationship as a supervisor-student relationship, on both sides ...

Postgraduate (interrupts): It's important I think ... for the supervisor to help, but also I want to learn how to do things, because when I finish my PhD I won't

be able to run down the hall for help. (laughs) (69 female supervisor, 70 female postgrad).

The issue of guidance is also explicit in the following exchange, where the supervisor also invoked a non-supervisory role:

Extract 15. Student: For me at this stage, I still think I need a lot of guidance, like I still don't think I'm very clear and very well informed about things that I'm saying, so I think supervisors for me at least have to put in a lot of guidance ...

Supervisor: Sometimes I feel ambivalent about the degree of guidance I should give, I have to say I think of myself as a teacher in general, not as a supervisor. Sometimes I think I'm over-paternalistic ... while some supervisors are more relaxed, which would be good for some students ... (1 male supervisor, 2 female postgrad).

Again, communicating that the postgraduate student is essentially a protégé or being cared for and guided by the supervisor was a way of invoking interpersonal and ingroup identities.

Independence of postgraduate students. From a social identity theory perspective, Weatherall and Gallois (2003) argued that members of a lower-status group often use the identity maintenance strategy of “social mobility” to join the higher-status group. The issue of postgraduate students' social mobility or independence was raised several times in these conversations, and highlighted the increasing independence of postgraduate students over the course of the supervisory relationship, as shown in the following two excerpts:

Extract 16. Supervisor: Because the evolution in the postgraduate student, being quite dependent, particularly in honours, to ever increasing independence in PhD ... it's like a step to independence. (53 male supervisor, 54 female postgrad).

Extract 17. Student: I think, as people go through the postgraduate process ... as they get more advanced through their work, they're expected to work more independently. (11 male supervisor, 12 male postgrad).

The following exchanges also illustrate this theme:

Extract 18. Student: You can't expect your supervisor to be up on everything ... specially a PhD, the whole point of a PhD is original work. (35 male supervisor, 36 female postgrad).

Extract 19. Supervisor: ... honestly at the end of it the student knows more about the area than the supervisor ... (69 female supervisor, 70 female postgrad).

In the two extracts above, the theme of independence was reflected through mention of the qualities that a successful postgraduate student and a successful thesis need (originality and expertise). Even so, in terms of interpersonal control or role-positioning this theme was paradoxical, in that it positioned postgraduate students as independent from their supervisors (interpersonal distance), while simultaneously emphasizing the postgraduates' status and ingroup position as an emerging academic.

This discussion of the accommodative interpersonal control themes that emerged in the present study highlights accommodative communication strategies which interactants can use to position themselves or the other interactant in ingroup terms or similar status or roles. The next set of themes to be discussed involves accommodative discourse management themes.

Accommodative Discourse Management

Willing to discuss or listen. This theme was expected to be salient for both supervisors and postgraduates. Most references were quite explicit, as in the following excerpt:

Extract 20. Postgraduate: Supervisors should listen to the ideas that students have.

(3 male supervisor, 4 male postgrad).

Interestingly, in the following excerpt a supervisor makes the implicit link between the dangers of a lack of listening, and non-accommodative conversational control in the form of dominance:

Extract 21. Supervisor: So listening is really important ... unless you listen you're not going to be able to have a conversation, you just dominate the conversation. (53 female supervisor, 54 male postgrad).

The following exchange illustrates both the importance of listening to the supervisor, as well as the importance to the student of the supervisor being accommodative in terms of conversational control:

Extract 22. Supervisor: [Am I] allowing sufficient input ... do you have enough of an opportunity to tell me things? (1 male supervisor, 2 female postgrad).

Student: Yeah, I think there's an understanding that supervisors usually let the student speak first, and make their train of thought a priority. (11 male supervisor, 12 female postgrad).

Approachability and accessibility. The issue of accessibility and approachability of the supervisor was important to postgraduate students, and it was also an issue that supervisors considered important in order to maintain a good relationship with their postgraduates. The value

of accessibility in making the student feel included is illustrated very well in the following exchange:

Extract 23. Postgraduate: Yes, like for me to go and pick up something from your house on a Friday morning meant a lot to me, to know where you live, and that you accept I can contact you ...

Supervisor: Yeah, of course, it brings up ... uncontrolled access. You [should] feel as though you can ring up ... I don't like to control access and say I'm only available at this time or that time ... (49 male supervisor, 50 male postgrad).

This exchange also indicates the importance to the postgraduate student of knowing the supervisor to some degree in an out-of-workplace context (being able to go the supervisor's home). This in itself can be seen as accommodating, in that the student has an interpersonal orientation towards the supervisor.

In the following exchange the supervisor invokes ingroup identity by referring to her own student days, in order to emphasize the importance of reducing the status-differential, as well as keeping communication channels open for maintaining an effective supervisor-postgraduate relationship. Clearly the student felt at ease with the supervisor in her response:

Extract 24. Supervisor: Well, going back to when I was a student, the thing that put me out with supervisors is if they weren't approachable ... is if they've got an air about them, or that brick wall ... you know, you don't want to go up and see them.

Postgraduate: And I always thought you have to be approachable on both sides, because if you have a problem with me, and I'm not approachable, then you can't talk to me. (47 female supervisor, 48 female postgrad).

Accommodative conversational control. Unlike most of the themes, accommodative conversational control was manifested mainly at a process level. Most instances of this strategy were coded in terms of exchanges at the beginning of the conversations, particularly in terms of negotiating who would initiate the conversation. In most instances, the supervisor took the lead, but usually in an accommodative manner, by offering their postgraduate student the choice of “going first” or not, as the following exchange illustrates:

Extract 25. Supervisor: Well, would you like to go first, or should I?

Student: No, you go first.

Supervisor: Okay. Actually ... what struck me as the main issues in communicating ... (15 male supervisor, 16 female postgrad).

Accommodative Relational Communication

Relational communication emerged as a salient theme, manifest mainly in terms of trust, open communication and praise.

Trust, honesty, and openness. Clearly, trust and open communication are accommodative at the relational level (see Willemyns, Gallois & Callan, 2003). Further, trusting the other person and being able to communicate openly with him or her is more likely to occur in an ingroup context than an outgroup context (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1998), as well as make communication more effective. The following exchange illustrates the importance of trust and openness for effective communication and a more harmonious working relationship:

Extract 26. Student: ... my personal feeling for communication to be effective [is]

it has to be honest, it has to be open, it has to be two-way.

Supervisor: Yeah, I mean, I said basically the same thing ... free to raise issues you want to raise. (23 male supervisor, 24 female postgrad).

In the following excerpt the supervisor accommodated by making it clear that he felt trust is more of an issue for the postgraduate student than it is for the supervisor, as the supervisor is in the more powerful position:

Extract 27. Supervisor: I think the trust thing is interesting in a way because ... I think that's more of an issue of postgrads towards supervisors than it is of supervisors towards postgrads. I mean, I think postgrad is an obsession, trusting the supervisor to have your interest at heart. (9 male supervisor, 10 female postgrad).

Praise. As Morand (1996) argued, praise is form of positive face maintenance that is more likely to be expressed by lower than higher-status interactants. Indeed, this was the case in the present study, where there were several instances of postgraduate students praising their supervisors. Further, as Gardner et al. (2001) argued, praise can sometimes be a form of ingratiation, as is evident in the postgraduate's statements in the following interaction:

Extract 28. Student: ... I think you're a really good supervisor. And in general I think we communicate really, really well ... probably the only reason I did enroll was because you were really encouraging ... The other thing, you're enthusiastic, exciting ...

Supervisor: but so are you, you encourage me ...

Student (interrupts): but you encourage me more ... it's really good, to get things done, and squeal and giggle and carry on and that. I did want to say that you are unusually good. I've talked to other students in the department ... It's funny a lot of postgraduate students come along and talk to me about their supervisors and I realize how lucky I am.

Supervisor: Well, I haven't done anything ... You've ...

Student (interrupts): Well you have ... there's sort of professional assistance and there's personal assistance ... I'm certainly envied by a lot of postgrads in this department, did you know that?

Supervisor: No, I didn't. (65 female supervisor, 66 male postgrad).

Rapport. As expected, rapport was a salient theme in these conversations (see also Campbell, White & Johnson, 2003). It was manifest mainly in terms of "getting on" with the other person, friendliness and liking the other person, as shown in the following excerpts:

Extract 29. Supervisor: ... you should be able to like each other and feel relaxed and like each other's company ... (65 female supervisor, male postgrad).

Extract 30. Student: I feel we communicate really well, probably because, because I like you, because I get on with you ... (37 female supervisor, 38 male postgrad).

Non-accommodative Interpersonal Control

As noted earlier, it was expected that mainly accommodative themes would emerge in the content analysis, given the positive nature of the conversations as well as positive sample bias. We did expect, however, that a number of non-accommodative themes would also emerge, as non-accommodative communication is not always negative in connotation. Rather, it can signify existing role differences that are perceived in neutral or even positive terms.

Power, status, or outgroup references. In a supervisory relationship, the power differential is often an issue for both interactants, either explicitly or at a more tacit level. In the following exchange the interactants articulated this issue quite explicitly:

Extract 31. Student: I think one of the problems of supervisor-student

communication is intimidation, specially with the emphasis on hierarchy and teacher-student type of relationship ...

Supervisor: ... power ... in one case I put colleague, but on the other hand it can't

totally be because it takes away some sort of responsibility, you need some sort of supervisor role, but on the other hand I think that by the time people get to postgraduate level, they are my colleagues ...

Student: ... I think anyways respect should be shown because you naturally do have

a larger experience, I don't disrespect that, but at the same time I think we should be working together ... (55 female supervisor, 56 male postgrad).

It should also be noted that in this conversation the issue of power or higher status was discussed by the supervisor in terms of her role-appropriate behavior. She said that it was her responsibility to take on the higher-status role, while at the same time treating her students as colleagues. Thus, while expressing her higher outgroup status, she simultaneously accommodated her student by referring to him in ingroup terms, that is, as a colleague. The student agreed by stating that the supervisor had more experience, but that they should be “working together”. Again, this illustrated the paradoxical mentoring relationship between supervisors and their postgraduate students.

Not all instances of non-accommodative interpersonal control coded in the present study were neutral or positive in context. The following exchange was atypical, but interesting, as the supervisor attempted to invoke accommodative role-positioning by expressing a concern that he and his student may not interact enough on a social, or out-of-role context. The student, however, responded in a non-accommodative manner by expressing a preference for the working

relationship to remain strictly that – a working relationship. It is also worth noting that the supervisor appeared to be surprised and perhaps embarrassed at the postgraduate student's responses. Thus, the postgraduate's responses were also coded as face-threat (see below).

Extract 32. Supervisor: ... Arranging various lunches, arranging meetings...I don't know, do you think we meet fairly reasonably on a social sort of level?

Student: Yeah, but I'm not concerned about the level of friendliness between the supervisor and student ...

Supervisor: Um, It doesn't worry you?

Student: No ... I think it's important that you are friendly...

Supervisor: That's right, in a few words unfriendly would be most unpleasant ...

Student: But I'm not sure there needs to be much social interchange outside ...

Supervisor: Yeah, well, I don't think you have to live with each other ... (pause).

It's a matter of judging how much interchange some people want ... (41 male supervisor, 42 male postgrad).

At this point, the supervisor appeared unsettled and seemed to yield to the student, agreeing with him that there is indeed a status difference between the them, and that this difference would indeed prevent a diminishing of the outgroup barrier:

Extract 33. Supervisor: ... some a bit more but there's differences ... there's a difference between the postgrad student and the academic and that interface is always there ... not equals in that sort of sense ... I think (pause).

Again, this exchange illustrated an explicit effort by student to maintain a social and status differential with his supervisor.

Threat, intimidation,. and power gap. It was interesting to find that many postgraduate students not only made comparisons between their own supervisors and other supervisors in order to praise them (e.g., “other postgraduate students are envious of me having you as a supervisor”), but they also raised the issue of being intimidated by the power gap between postgraduate students and their supervisors by referring to other supervisors. Often, the supervisors expressed surprise that postgraduate students are intimidated or perceive such a large power gap, as the following exchange illustrated:

Extract 34. Student: ... I used to talk to people and they were all scared of their supervisors...

Supervisor: Really?

Student: Yeah...

Supervisor: Good heavens...

Student: Yeah ... everyone else is scared of their supervisor, saying oh, I've got my weekly meeting tomorrow or I don't want to go I haven't done anything, what am I going to do? ... I think students by and large are scared of...

Supervisor: You surprise me, I didn't picture that in general, not among [discipline name deleted] anyway. I'm surprised ... Is there that much of a sort of gap?

Student: Yes...

Supervisor: I guess I can't see that...

Student: ... I think there's a big gap, a lot of postgraduate students are scared of their supervisors, and I also think a lot of them don't like their supervisors ...

Supervisor: Um ...Yeah, strange (pause). (65 female supervisor, 66 male postgrad).

Non-Accommodative Discourse Management

Directives. Again, non-accommodative communication strategies were not common, as the supervisors and students were essentially engaged in polite conversation. Some instances of directives were present, however. Directives can be a manifestation of higher status, as it usually the higher status person who is in a position to give directives to the other person (Morand, 2000). As such, directives can be conceptualized as an outgroup communication behavior, signifying power. Nevertheless, directives can, in the appropriate context, be perceived positively by supervisees (as giving direction), particularly in the early stages of the supervisory relationship. This is illustrated in the following statement by a postgraduate student:

Extract 35. Student: Yeah ... that's what I've listed as one of my things too ... have some set readings set by the supervisor for the student ... giving me direction ... I think also to have goals and structure for the discussion, I think you do that. (1 male supervisor, 2 female postgrad).

Supervisors are also often aware that it is their role and responsibility to use directives, not necessarily as markers of power, but as a means of guiding and supporting their supervisee. In the following excerpt, the supervisor asserted his need to use directives from time to time, but at the same time pointed to the importance of reciprocity by reminding his postgraduate student that he was also in a position to make demands of the supervisor:

Extract 36. Supervisor: Sometimes I need to come a bit harder and say, listen we need to do this, this, and this ... it needs to be done tomorrow. But by the same token, if I haven't read your work for some time, you can say, hey I

need some feedback tomorrow or the next day or whatever ... (11 male supervisor, 12 male postgrad).

Non-Accommodative Relational Communication

Relational communication includes face issues, and face issues are integral to accommodation processes. Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory essentially conceptualized positive face as being related to one's positive self image, which can be threatened by criticism from others. They conceptualized negative face as one's sense of autonomy, which can be threatened by requests from others, or other forms of impinging. Positive face often results in approval and affiliation, and thereby accommodation, while face threat is, by definition, threatening and therefore non-accommodative. It is particularly threatening in a status-marked context such as supervisor-supervisee communication, where face-threat readily implies intergroup perceptions (Gallois & Giles, 1998).

Negative face. Again due to the positive context of the conversations analyzed in the present study, plus the likelihood that the interactants may have been self-conscious about being audio-recorded, there were very few instances of negative face threats, or impinging on the other person. In the following excerpt the postgraduate student attempted to be humorous by referring to one of the items in the questionnaire she had just completed, but apparently managed to impinge unintentionally and make the supervisor feel uncomfortable, so the supervisor quickly changed the topic, apparently as a way of maintaining her own negative face:

Extract 37. Student: So, how attractive am I? (laughs)

Supervisor: This is ... it's difficult when answering this, to just, to not just think of you ... but actually what did you put as really effective conversation? (7 female supervisor, 6 female postgrad).

Positive face. Once again, there were very few instances of positive face threat; the interactants were very polite in the conversations. In the following excerpt, the supervisor came close to threatening the student's positive face by raising the issue of ineffective communication between himself and his postgraduate. He quickly qualified the statement, possibly to reduce face threat:

Extract 38. Supervisor: Well, maybe we should talk about things that go wrong sometimes. I mean not a lot of things have gone wrong between us ... (3 male supervisor, 4 male postgrad).

In the following example, a postgraduate student appeared inadvertently to threaten the positive face of his supervisor by stating that the supervisor had little knowledge of the postgraduate student's research area. The supervisor interrupted with some humor to decrease the discomfort:

Extract 39. Student: You don't know, or you didn't know when we started out, a lot about [the research topic] but then ...

Supervisor (interrupts): I'm getting to learn (laughs) ... (21 male supervisor, 22 male postgrad).

In another example, a student apparently embarrassed his supervisor by raising the issue of their miscommunication, and the supervisor quickly changed the topic:

Extract 40. Student: Sometimes we've miscommunicated, for example, we've arranged a meeting and turned up at different places on different dates ...

Supervisor (interrupts): ... that's what I mean about minimum preconditions, I said [on the questionnaire], try to be available for meetings ... (25 male supervisor, 26 male postgrad).

Conclusion

The themes above show clearly how communication accommodation theory provides an important framework for analyzing and interpreting the strategies that serve to accommodate the other person by invoking ingroup identities. As noted earlier, some of the themes were expected, based on previous parts of this project content analysis (Willemyns et al., 2000) and on the literature in general. These themes included non-dominance, similarities, listening, feedback, trust, status references, and face. There were however, a number of emergent themes, including individualization, ingroup identity, independence, approachability, and intimidation. These emergent themes, while not predicted, are consistent with CAT in that they specify ingroup and intergroup communication processes.

Face

It became increasingly clear during the interpretation stage of the analyses that positive face maintenance, or politeness, was an all-encompassing macro-level theme throughout almost all of the conversations. Thus, for example, when a supervisor expressed a stance of equality with, or non-dominance over, his or her student, the supervisor not only invoked an ingroup relationship with the postgraduate student, but also used a positive face or politeness strategy. This served to bolster the postgraduate student's self-image by implicitly reducing perceptions of a status differential. The finding that the term "mutual respect" was often used by the interactants in the context of describing an equal relationship further attests to this, because, as argued by Willemyns et al. (2000), a core theme of satisfactory communication is that interactants feel respected by the other person, and of course, feeling respected is important to a person's positive self-image.

Many of the other themes in this study can be interpreted from a face perspective. For example, the accommodative theme of “willingness to listen” can be seen not only as a sign of interest in communicating with the other person in terms of non-role topics (and thereby accommodating), but also as a sign of politeness or positive face maintenance. MacMartin et al. (2001) argued that while face is a central concept in communication, it is often difficult to operationalize, particularly in coding schemes. Indeed, they stated that “the problem of face and politeness in one sense is that everything has to do with face. As Goffman claimed, almost all acts involving others are modified ... by considerations of face” (p. 234). Goffman’s (1967) claim infers the conceptual link between accommodation processes and face. Future research should be conducted to examine further the conceptualization and operationalization of face issues within the CAT framework.

Methodological Issues and Limitations

The overall tone of almost all the conversations was very friendly and positive, as well as accommodative and face-saving, and both the supervisors and their postgraduate students appeared to be careful to avoid face threats. This positive bias can be attributed to two major factors. Firstly, the interactants were aware they were being audio-recorded, so may have employed impression management to convey an exceptionally good working relationship, virtually devoid of communication problems. Secondly, it is possible that due to the voluntary nature of the interactants’ participation, there was positive sample bias. This is supported by the fact that of the more than 100 supervisors who were requested to participate in the study, 75 supervisors were not willing to participate.

In sum, the present study provided a rich, interpretive analysis of several communication themes. These themes show the utility of communication accommodation theory as a robust

framework for analyzing interactants' ways of invoking ingroup and intergroup identities and protecting their own and the other person's face. This work also represents an extension of CAT into a systematic description of relational and face moves as accommodative or non-accommodative. This approach shows the utility of an intergroup approach even in this largely positive context – which like all close relationships always has the potential for conflict as well as great rewards. Finally, this study continues the application of CAT to workplace interactions, where future research can shed much light.

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